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## Haitian Spirituality: Breaking the Cycle

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## Haitian Spirituality: Breaking the Cycle

### Matthew Gill

#### Introduction

TOUSSAINT: Some day men will know one another, they will weep for the same sorrows! No one alive has a monopoly on suffering; martyrs are scattered throughout the earth, like ashes in the forest.

MACAYA: But today! ... See how they take advantage of you, Toussaint. They plant in your humanity the tree of their inhumane domination. Give in to their idea of generosity and they will use it to crush you. Oh! You earn only their contempt by consenting!

TOUSSAINT: Go away! Your work is done....

MACAYA (*turning to Mackandal*): Tell him he betrayed us as surely as if he himself opened the gates for the dogs.

TOUSSAINT: I cry out for human brotherhood. May it soon fill the earth. Lord, pardon me for my wrongdoings, for I was only fighting for my people.<sup>1</sup>

Excerpted from Édouard Glissant's 1961 play *Monsieur Toussaint* — a fantastical re-imagining of Toussaint Louverture's final moments as Governor-General of the revolutionary colony of Saint Domingue — these lines involve Toussaint along with Macaya, the spirit of an insurgent leader, and Mackandal, the spirit of Saint Domingue's most infamous Vodou priest and maroon. While the image of spirits critiquing and advising Louverture may seem entertaining in relation to the artistic medium, the purpose of Glissant's cosmology treads further. In this living-dead dialogue,

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<sup>1</sup> Édouard Glissant and J. Michael Dash, *Monsieur Toussaint: A Play* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 96.

and throughout the play, Glissant — a native of another French-Caribbean colony, Martinique — provides a testament to those topics that are gripping for Haitians: spirits and savants. As a work meant to be viewed by Haitians and other Caribbean blacks, *Monsieur Toussaint* suggests that religion and spirituality are not just topics that Haitians can intellectually grapple, but that also appear in areas of regular Haitian life.

Foremost, as shown in the excerpt, Glissant's use of Toussaint — whose extensive and impactful involvement as a military and political leader throughout the last ten years of the Haitian Revolution can't be understated — implicates the insurgent leader's spirituality; by involving Toussaint with returned-spirits, Glissant implies the Governor-General's Vodou roots; by having Toussaint ask forgiveness of the one Lord, Glissant reveals his Christian faith.<sup>2,3</sup> But as a representation of the Haitian people, Louverture's spirituality means more; the effortless blending of the two faiths mimics the same blending that defines real-life Haitian spirituality, highlighting its extension into the goings-on of the country. Vodou's facets in Haitian spirituality appear to have a stronger relationship with moral decision-making in daily life than with religious symbolism, while Christianity's facets focus exactly on the symbolism of salvation and redemption, shown via Toussaint's dual role: as "papa" of the Haitians and as a sacrificial lamb for their Revolution. And with both faiths acting as driving forces behind the Governor-General's decisions, their political involvement is indicated.

In the end, Toussaint, the follower of a "universal" Christian faith, sacrifices himself for the betterment of his subordinate (Jean-Jacques Dessalines) and the Haitian people within a context of discernment rooted in Vodou values. Ultimately then, Glissant

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia W. Leonard, "Haitian Revolution," in *Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism since 1450*, ed. Thomas Benjamin, vol. 2 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 538-542. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* (accessed June 15, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Guynup, "Haiti: Possessed by Voodoo," *National Geographic News*, July 7, 2004 (accessed June 12, 2018).

shows Vodou and Christianity, despite their differences and amidst political engagement, working together for a net “positive” result for Haitians. Although this result resides in a fictionalized context, it encompasses truths of Vodou-Christianity in the Caribbean whilst pivoting an opinion of Glissant’s that this paper shares – Haiti’s unique spirituality, connected favorably with politics, might be the best means for the people of Haiti to achieve their own beneficence.

This paper’s analysis will begin with a historical overview of religious developments in Haiti, starting with pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue. Citing examples of both domestic (slave- and *colon*-based) and foreign influence, this brief recounting will argue the systemic and necessary connection between religion and politics in Haiti, as the two are intertwined by Vodou and Christianity, acting both separately and as one. Afterwards, an argument for the use of Haiti’s unique spirituality — a mixed Vodou-Christianity — as a political force for systematic change, by and for *all* the people of Haiti, will be made. Given the widespread poverty, sickness, sexism and racism, and internal fighting that have plagued Haiti’s past and present, a change is necessary to save the lives of the Haitian people and their nation.

### Conceptualizing Haitian Politics

Before delving into Haiti’s political roots, however, it is necessary to define “politics” as it relates to the island nation and its most heavily represented people: the peasantry — which, when extended to include the urban lower class, encompasses 90% of Haiti’s population.<sup>4</sup> In the past, some Haitian academics have focused on the political exodus of Haiti’s peasantry over the course of the nation’s post-revolutionary governmental development. With no means of participating in urban “politics,” these historians argue that Haiti’s peasantry hasn’t been significantly involved in

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<sup>4</sup> David Nicholls, “Rural Protest and Peasant Revolt, 1804-1869,” in *Haitian History: New Perspectives*, ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (New York: Routledge, 2013), 193.

the political sphere beyond insurgency.<sup>5</sup> However, Haitian politics cannot be constricted to purely government involvement (e.g. voting) *because* political involvement has had a different history — one continuously defined by subjectivity to despotic, paternalistic leaders and responding revolutions. As will be shown in the next section, the manifestation of religion in Haiti's politics has been due, in large part, to the lower class. If the “political” designation is stripped from this religious history, then a fundamental connection is lost. Haiti's politics would not be the same without the Haitian faith — the faith of the peasantry.

### **The History of Haiti's Political Faith**

#### *Pre-Revolution*

Beginning in the late 1780s and lasting through the 1790s, the slave-plantation colony of Saint Domingue — the Pearl of the Antilles — was the wealthiest European colony in the Caribbean, cherished by the French colonists and absentee-planters that made their fortunes from the “free” labor of their enslaved blacks. By the start of the French Revolution, the slave population — composed mostly of African-born blacks — dwarfed the free population by about seven times (the free population encompassing approximately 30,000 *gens de couleur* and 40,000 white *colon*, both *petit blanc* and *grand blanc*).<sup>6</sup> In this pre-revolutionary period, Vodou and Christianity (French Catholicism) were well-established and practiced by both slaves and *gens de couleur*, however their political associations differed.

The politicization of Vodou at this time nourished the roots of its most consistent political occurrence: as a consolidator for fraternal coalescence and revolt against mistreatment — a stimulant for revolution. The most prevalent form of slave resistance was marronage, and because most maroon leaders were Vodou priests (and many slaves were aware of Vodou, if not

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<sup>5</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Haiti, State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism* (New York: Monthly Review, 1990), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard, “Haitian Revolution.”

already active practitioners), Vodou was able to survive as a cultural “glue,” aiding mistreated blacks by directing them towards like-minded communities that also served as a form of political revolt against the establishment of slavery. This movement is best personified by Mackandal (mentioned in the excerpt), who traveled throughout the colony, using the mutual faith and principles of Vodou to entice slaves into not only marronage, but gradual, tangible revolt against the colonists (e.g. through fear of poison).<sup>7</sup> With tones of fear, pro-slavery colonists and visitors noted his dual role as a spiritual and political force; his ability to evoke tones and actions of resistance, together with his Vodou-based supernatural capabilities, ironically made him a Christian-like messianic figure upon death.<sup>8</sup> Regardless, Vodou’s political position was set, and if a colonist’s translation of a Vodou chant is accurate — “we swear to destroy whites and everything they possess” — some practitioners were eager to put political thought into action.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to Christianity’s involvement in the slave population, some analysts say that Catholic slaves existed in great numbers merely because they were forced through Baptism by their white masters, while others mistakenly report black Christianity to be mostly restricted to poorly represented creole slaves and *gens de couleur*.<sup>10</sup> These reports are too narrow, however, ignoring other sources of Christian influence — namely Kongolese culture and the French Revolution. By the start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, approximately one-half of new slaves entering Saint Domingue were from West/Central Africa, most

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<sup>7</sup> Carolyn E. Fick, “Slave Resistance,” in *Haitian History: New Perspectives*, ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (New York: Routledge, 2013), 57-58.

<sup>8</sup> Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description topographique...de Saint-Domingue* [Philadelphia, 1797-1798], 1:46-51, in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Louis Marie César Auguste Drouin de Bercy, *De Saint-Domingue* [Paris, 1814], 175-178, in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 23-24.

<sup>10</sup> Trouillot, *Haiti, State against Nation*, 36; David Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), xii.

from the Kingdom of the Kongo.<sup>11</sup> This significant representation certainly fostered the continuance of Kongolese culture in the slave society — which, in the late 1700s, was dominated by a Christian political ideology, witnessed through paternalism and the requirement for kings to be *for* the people.<sup>12</sup> Christian Kongolese slaves then, and those they influenced, had their initial conceptualizations of good governance defined by the precepts of the faith.

The French Revolution's Christian influence on enslaved spirituality — ironic considering *that* Revolution's infamous anti-clericalism — was largely coincidence. A month before the start of the French Revolution, Saint Domingue's elite planter group was vying for the colony's formal recognition in the Estates General, receiving negative backlash from the metropole due, in part, to the anti-slavery rhetoric of the largely Christian *Société des amis des Noirs* ("Society of the friends of the Blacks").<sup>13</sup> The combination of increased Christian revolutionary Enlightenment ideology and heightened colony-metropole interaction likely facilitated a more rapid transfer of socially empowering Christian ideology. A boon to this development was Henri-Baptiste Grégoire, an extremely outspoken and well-known politician-priest. If any politician's words were to reach black ears in Saint Domingue and ring true, they would be Grégoire's — who, across multiple speeches in Paris (and in public messages to the black population), recognized slavery as an immoral and non-Christian institution and supported the ideal of Enlightenment principles leading blacks from

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<sup>11</sup> David Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," in *More Than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Indiana University Press, 1996), 261.

<sup>12</sup> John K. Thornton, "'I am the Subject of the King of Congo': African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution," in *Haitian History: New Perspectives*, ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (New York: Routledge, 2013), 92.

<sup>13</sup> Malick W. Ghachem, "The 'Trap' of Representation: Sovereignty, Slavery and the Road to the Haitian Revolution," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 29, no. 1 (2003): 131-136.

mistreatment.<sup>14</sup> Serving as a human example of religion mixing with politics – and being a social pariah himself for supporting this ideology – Grégoire embodied the liberal Christian political involvement for both France and its colonies, and thus charged the ideals of the upcoming Haitian Revolution.<sup>15</sup>

### *Revolutionary Period*

Vodou during the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) essentially served the same role as during the pre-revolution era, but with the abolition of slavery a much more tangible “political” accomplishment. This African-derived but Haitianized faith remained a tool of unification amongst insurgents, while also instilling fear in the colonial opposition; amidst the death that comes with revolution, it is clear — based on the horror of both white reaction and retaliation — that Vodou caused even Christian colonists to tremble at the thought of pagan witchcraft.<sup>16,17</sup> Aspects of Vodou’s key principles — namely brotherhood — can be seen in the rhetoric of the most significant insurgent leader, Toussaint Louverture, as he frequently pleas for his “brothers” (insurgent footmen) to rally to his cause.<sup>18</sup> But even more consistent was Toussaint’s use of paternalistic Christian rhetoric, citing himself as the “father” of “wayward children,” again for the purpose of

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<sup>14</sup> Henri-Baptiste Grégoire, “Lettre aux citoyens de couleur et nègres libres” [Paris, 1791] and “Mémoire en faveur de couleur ou sang-mêlés de St.-Domingue, et des autres isles françaises de l’Amérique” [Paris, 1789] in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 47-48.

<sup>15</sup> Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Baron de Vastey, *The Colonial System Unveiled*, ed. Chris Bongie (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 115, 122.

<sup>17</sup> M. LeClerc, “An Expedition Against the Insurgents [November 1791],” in *Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 93-104.

<sup>18</sup> Toussaint Louverture, “Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Manuscrits, Fonds français 12104, piece 68, 1 ventose IV [20 Feb. 1796],” in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 130.



gathering support.<sup>19</sup> Other black and mulatto leaders of the Revolution similarly utilized Christian symbolism to contextualize the goals and loyalties of the insurgent forces; Macaya famously referred to the King of Spain, the King of France, and the King of Kongo as the “three kings” of the revolutionary forces who would offer Haitians salvation — like the three magi who together charted a path to Christ.<sup>20</sup> Finally, this period saw pro-revolutionary involvement from colonist-clergymen (e.g. helping slaves build fortifications and providing general counsel), likely strengthening insurgent loyalty to Christianity along with Vodou.<sup>21</sup>

### *Post-Revolution*

In the continuing post-revolutionary period of Haiti’s history, Vodou and Christianity have, for the peasant masses, largely served similar political purposes; they are sources of shared ideology and thus shared political desires. But in this extended timeframe, both faiths have also seen more extensive manipulation by the government — their “new” political evolution. The greatest degree of federal involvement was necessarily through Haiti’s Catholic Church, as Catholicism was made the official religion in Toussaint’s 1801 pre-nationhood constitution and was recognized by the Vatican as such in 1860 with President Geffrard’s concordat.<sup>22</sup> After 1860 — with the influx of Vatican-approved

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<sup>19</sup> Toussaint Louverture, “Toussaint and the Ex-Slaves,” in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 131.

<sup>20</sup> Thornton, “‘I am the Subject of the King of Congo’,” 92.

<sup>21</sup> LeClerc, “An Expedition Against the Insurgents,” 99; Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, “The Interrogation of the Abbé De la Haye, Curé of Dondon [December 1792]” in *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Insurrection*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 158-163.

<sup>22</sup> Toussaint Louverture, *Constitution de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue* in *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 164.

clergymen — the Haitian Church's status as a pro-elite authoritarian structure was solidified until the 1960s.<sup>23</sup>

During this time, various government actors — including U.S. marines after the 1915 U.S. invasion — used the peasantry's Vodou and Christian faiths against them; the designation of Haitians as Vodou-practitioners was used as an excuse for execution; the defamation of Christian symbolism (e.g. the image of Charlemagne Peralte killed, in a crucified position) was used to encourage submission.<sup>24</sup> Rather than promote such submission, however, these actions have largely encouraged lower class political outcry against these and other mistreatments — an outcry centered in faith. This was seen in the significant public support for Francois Duvalier's election; the success of which has been credited to the public's approval of his connections with Vodou and Christianity, together.<sup>25</sup> However, it didn't take long for Papa Doc's reputation to nosedive for 90% of Haitians due mostly to his new evolution of despotic violence, in which children, the elderly, and civil servants (including clergymen) were no longer protected, and women became predominant victims.<sup>26</sup> And even though he attempted to bend the Haitian Church further into his will through nationalization (i.e. replacing foreign clergymen with Haitian Catholics), his continued injustices, together with his stifling of Christian newspapers and radio stations in attempts to stagnate the growing homogenization of public disapproval, eventually lead the national Church to outwardly scorn the Duvalier Regime.<sup>27</sup> It was at this point that both the official Haitian Church and organized Vodou factions began to focus on a particular aspect of their shared Haitian ideology, namely the necessary focus on improving

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<sup>23</sup> Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, "Dynastic Dictatorship: The Duvalier Years, 1957-1986," in *Haitian History: New Perspectives*, ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (New York: Routledge, 2013), 273.

<sup>24</sup> Brenda Gayle Plummer, "Under the Gun," in *Haitian History: New Perspectives*, ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (New York: Routledge, 2013), 244-45.

<sup>25</sup> Bellegarde-Smith, "Dynastic Dictatorship," 273.

<sup>26</sup> Trouillot, *Haiti, State against Nation*, 167.

<sup>27</sup> Bellegarde-Smith, "Dynastic Dictatorship," 278.

the well-being of the mistreated and disenfranchised — essentially, the well-being of the Haitian people.<sup>28</sup> Influenced by liberation theology, the Church began its *Ti Legliz* (“Little Church”) movement, creating hundreds of Christian communities that were meant to serve the needs of the Haitian people by overseeing an improved articulation of the nature of Haiti’s unique Vodou-Christianity, and by encouraging public participation.<sup>29,30</sup> Later, making the nationalized Church even *more* political, the religious political movement (and political party) *Lavalas* sprang from *Ti Legliz*, supporting the priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s ascendance to the presidency in 1990. Not surprisingly, in being twice ousted as President, Aristide has been regarded by *Lavalas* supporters as a messianic figure who will return to bring salvation.<sup>31</sup>

### *Looking Back*

In this religious-political history, there are clearly common themes that apply distinctly to either Christianity or Vodou — but the ultimate effect (as seen in the continued relevance of the *Lavalas* and *Ti Legliz* movements) has been to foster the duo’s political convergence; in theory, this journey into the explicit political sphere was for the general beneficence of the Haitian people. But in this history, and in contemporary Haiti, it is also clear how Vodou and Christianity have complemented each other, through their political developments, for the sake of the spiritual health of Haitians — beyond the fact that they already shared aspects of ritual traditions and conceptualizations of spirits or saints.<sup>32</sup> For example, as both the national Church and individual Vodou

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<sup>28</sup> Bellegarde-Smith, “Dynastic Dictatorship,” 280.

<sup>29</sup> Ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall, *Haitian History: New Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2013), 223.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Fatton Jr., “The Rise, Fall, and Second Coming of Jean-Bertrand Aristide,” in *Haitian History: New Perspectives*, ed. Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall (New York: Routledge, 2013), 298.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 296, 306.

<sup>32</sup> Guynup, “Haiti: Possessed by Voodoo”; Terry Rey, “Junta, Rape, and Religion in Haiti, 1993-1994,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 15, no. 2 (1999): 85.

factions oriented themselves, together, against the despotism of such leaders as Duvalier, comfort in the unity of the Haitian people against the wealthy merchants and politicians was consolidated throughout the public, in response to simultaneous political consolidation.<sup>33</sup> Facing decades of both neglect and specific mistreatment, the idea of a unified Haitian people has only grown stronger — owing to shared spirituality. As another example, take the consistent messianic symbolism and supernatural Vodou powers that the public has attributed to previous leaders, Aristide being the most prominent in recent years. While most would rightfully argue against messianism due to its paternalistic and authoritarian tendencies, its political pervasiveness is telling of the public's spiritual needs, which were much the same for slaves in the days of Saint Domingue. This need is for *hope* — hope for the possibility of a beneficent interjection, either by God or by a messianic savant, from the horrific circumstances brought by unjust politics.<sup>34</sup> In this way, the continual need for revolt has translated into a continual need for hope. And hope, as one should expect from this clearly spiritual society, is defined chiefly in terms of faith.

### Breaking the Cycle

Given the age of the nation and its intimate history of despotic leaders and peasant revolts, it is depressing to see that even with Haiti's most recent major political developments, many of the same problems persist and that, from a foreigner's perspective, little genuine progress has been made towards healing the population. Just as religion's founding and continual politicization in Saint Domingue — at least as a tool of the peasantry — mirrors the same active religious politicization that has recently been utilized by the Haitian public, the systematic mistreatment inherent to the institution of slavery mirrors the current class-based

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<sup>33</sup> Bellegarde-Smith, "Dynastic Dictatorship," 283.

<sup>34</sup> Rey, "Junta, Rape, and Religion," 84.

oppression engendered by wealthy merchants and politicians (titled upper-class “urbanites” by Michel-Rolph Trouillot). In reviewing the horrors specific to Haiti’s colonial system just after the nation’s founding, Henri Christophe’s second-in-command, Baron de Vastey, said this regarding the effects of slavery and racial discrimination:

Indeed, how can life be endured when it has reached the lowest stage of degradation and wretchedness? When death must be suffered a thousand times over, in the cruelest of torments, when one has been reduced to that deplorable condition, without hope of escape, is it not a glaring act of cowardice to welcome life?<sup>35</sup>

A harrowing depiction of the slave’s predicament, for certain, but considering the government’s continued violence into modernity — and the essential banishment of the lower class’ needs from the concerns of the elite — such feelings are likely shared by many Haitians. Indeed, their labor is also manipulated for the profit of those in power, but in the last ten years (especially since the 2010 earthquake) the Haitian people have suffered a host of abuses due to the neglect of their own government as well as foreign powers — a neglect to generally maintain human rights.<sup>36</sup> With 9,000 dead since 2016 from an ongoing cholera epidemic, an impacted prison system, an adult literacy rate of about 60%, and a “top 1%” that controls more than half of the nation’s wealth, hearing de Vastey’s words spoken by a Haitian today would be understandable.<sup>37</sup> Now, with the same degree of urgency felt by the slave insurgents that made the nation of Haiti, the Haitian public must look to each

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<sup>35</sup> Vastey, *The Colonial System Unveiled*, 129.

<sup>36</sup> “Haiti.” Human Rights Watch. Accessed June 14, 2018.  
<https://www.hrw.org/americas/haiti>.

<sup>37</sup> Anup Shah, “Human Rights in Various Regions: Haiti,” *Global Issues*, October 1st, 2010. <http://www.globalissues.org/article/141/haiti>.

other to mutually facilitate the end of the country's clear cycle of mistreatment.

### **The Role of Haitian Spirituality**

While in 1990 Michel-Rolph Trouillot had no knowledge of the future intensification of Haitian turmoil by disease and natural disaster, his statement of the country's ultimate in need in the years following the Duvalier Regime still bears truth. In agreement with this paper, he believes that Haiti needs some unifying force or institution that allows *all* sectors of the population to communicate, express their needs, and work together for solutions.<sup>38</sup> Here, the solution is articulated with necessary facets, two of which are clear; the solution must come from and be enacted by the people, and it must also extend, at least in understanding, to all Haitians. Haitian spirituality — the Vodou-Christianity hybrid that has been developing politically since its inception — satisfies these facets of a “solution” to Haiti's ongoing turmoil.

Simply based on the evolutionary trajectory of Haiti's political faith, there should be no doubt that Haitian spirituality came *from* the Haitian people. Defined by revolutions, population mistreatment, and general socio-political unrest, Haitian historical identity necessarily encompasses religion because of Haitian spirituality's influence in these areas. As these major political movements, particularly the uprisings of the lower class, derived from the needs of Haiti's mistreated and disenfranchised, the political significance of Haitian spirituality was also derived from “the people,” and has in most cases been put into action by the people. However, the applicability of Haitian spirituality to the genuine needs of the population must also be evident if it is to be considered the “solution” for the Haitian public. But again, as is shown throughout Haiti's religious history, the purpose of Haitian spirituality has always been oriented for the people's benefit. To confirm its applicability in modernity, one might analyze the

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<sup>38</sup> Trouillot, *Haiti, State against Nation*, 230.

purported values of Vodou and Christianity in relation to their usefulness for public beneficence. Vodou's focus on the innate equality and dignity of all mankind (reminiscent of Grégoire's ideology) certainly fits Trouillot's requirement, and the positive Haitian perception of the life-improving value of faith is clearly demonstrated in the rhetoric of Haiti-related artistic works, such as *Monsieur Toussaint*.<sup>39,40</sup>

The widespread extension of Haitian spirituality — such that its predominant moral, social, and political principles have been recognized (though not necessarily followed) by nearly every Haitian — is also historically evidenced. Consistently, the nature of the faith's unique spirituality and cosmology heightened the island-wide awareness of its existence. Vodou being outlawed in the slave colony of Saint Domingue, and white colonists frequently punishing their slaves out of fear of Vodou witchcraft, both argue for the inherent ability of Haitian spirituality to invigorate reflection and action in *all* people — even those who, by their Catholic standards, shouldn't believe in “witchcraft.”<sup>41,42</sup> But, as an example of Haitian spirituality's far-reach, its ability to incite fear in colonists is no longer relevant to the nation's situation — such a class distinction, between master and slave, no longer exists. However, there is of course the predominating class distinction between the peasantry and the wealthy merchants and politicians. Again, the ideology of Haitian spirituality essentially crosses this gap. The initial public support for Francois Duvalier, rooted in an appreciation of his knowledge of Vodou, is evidence of the public leaning towards politicians who best represent them.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Haitian spirituality should continue to be relevant in the lives of Haiti's elected officials.

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Clark, “Domestic Violence in the Haitian Culture and the American Legal Response: *Fanm Ahysyen ki Gen Kouraj*,” 37 *University of Miami Inter-American Law Review* 297 (2006): 309.

<sup>40</sup> Glissant, *Monsieur Toussaint*.

<sup>41</sup> Fick, “Slave Resistance,” 60.

<sup>42</sup> Vastey, *The Colonial System Unveiled*, 115, 122.

<sup>43</sup> Bellegarde-Smith, “Dynastic Dictatorship,” 273.

But, as mentioned before, the cyclical nature of Haitian oppression mimics the cyclical nature of the use of religion as a source of political unity amongst the peasantry. This relationship suggests another possible connection — that breaking the cycle of oppression requires breaking the cycle of revolt driven by religious connection. In other words, improvements made to the system of unity-in-spirituality might better facilitate the results of peasant pushback, providing a stronger voice for the people. Rooted in a liberation theology that ideologically accepts associations between Christianity and Vodou, the *Ti Legliz* and *Lavalas* movements offer starting points for change; these aren't, however, "solutions" themselves due to their failures of continued political paternalism after Jean-Bertrand Aristide's second term, as well as internal fractionation.<sup>44</sup>

Paternalism, and the messianism that it fosters in such vulnerable, systematically mistreated populations as the Haitian lower class, is detailed in history above — but it would seem that the prophetic symbolism surrounding Aristide was the most explicitly articulated and widely encompassing of such symbolism in Haiti's history. To "pro-Aristidians," Aristide wasn't a simply a figure that would return to bring salvation, he was specifically the "messiah who would overcome all obstacles and triumph over the satanic forces of Duvalierism, privilege, and corruption."<sup>45</sup> And these thoughts weren't isolated to the most radical *Ti Legliz* supporters; Aristide's messianic role was agreed upon by the majority of Haitians.<sup>46</sup> The issue with the extreme tendency for messianism in Haitian spirituality is that it places the responsibility of salvation — breaking free of oppression — on someone else. This persistent ideology self-detracts from the agency of the united Haitian people. If it is drilled into the minds of new generations of Haitians that all one can or must do is wait for a savior, then proactive Haitian-driven efforts will continue to be stagnant,

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<sup>44</sup> Fatton, Jr., "The Rise, Fall, and Second Coming of Jean-Bertrand Aristide," 307.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*



rooted in complacency. While Haitian spirituality (and Christianity in particular) works well to provide hope through figures like Toussaint and Aristide, that faith-driven hope should be accompanied by active participation. Moving forward, the danger of explicit messianism — as spread by Haitian civilians and religious leaders alike — should be warned against.

In the developmental years of *Ti Legliz*, leading up to (and soon after) the end of the Duvalier Regime, the Haitian Church was seemingly being recognized by Western visitors as the center of proper democratic principles in the country — as the only institution with a framework that could subsist outside of the government, and as an organization working for social justice.<sup>47</sup> But with *Ti Legliz* founded as multiple communities spread throughout the country, there also didn't appear to be much organizational power besides *Lavalas* — not every religious community touted the same exact political principles, undermining the movement's holistic efforts.<sup>48</sup> Similar critiques of Haiti's small church communities and organizations are still made today.<sup>49</sup> For Haitian spirituality to make a stronger impact in the politically-charged unification of the Haitian public, there must be a greater degree of consolidation between the different splintered *Ti Legliz* (and Vodou-favoring) religious groups. While such consolidation may force compromises upon the promoted ideologies of different groups, the effort to make a stronger united front out of Haitian spirituality should improve not only the Western perception of Haiti's people-driven efforts for proper government treatment, but also encourage stronger ties between Haitians themselves.

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<sup>47</sup> Mark D. Danner, "The Struggle for a Democratic Haiti," *The New York Times*, June 21, 1987, National ed. Accessed June 11, 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Shelley Wiley, "A Grassroots Religious Response to Domestic Violence in Haiti," *Journal of Religion & Abuse* 5, no. 1 (2003): 23-33. Accessed June 15, 2018.

### Facing Reality

Conveying the extent of human suffering in Haiti — both historical and contemporary — is a difficult task. Even more difficult, however, is conjuring an error-free solution to this suffering. In facing the reality of their politically-wrought mistreatment, Haitians and their allies must recognize that there won't ever be a single solution — especially when such institutions as racism and sexism still socially pervade the general populace and politically pervade Haiti's government.<sup>50</sup> But optimism for the usefulness of Haitian Spirituality to enact change shouldn't be abandoned. In recent years, community-based religious groups have been taking steps to strengthen Haitian unity, primarily by promoting music, poetry, and lectures that attack those social factors preventing communion, particularly sexism and domestic violence.<sup>51</sup> Though these groups are critiqued for not “joining forces” into one human rights-supporting Vodou-Christianity, they still yield tangible changes in Haiti's communities, bringing Haitians of all genders together such that they might serve as a more influential political force.<sup>52</sup> Here is Haitian spirituality in action: common faith, with the context of solidarity in oppression, promoting mutual values and thus unity against the oppressors. Progress is possible, but the struggle will continue to be hard-fought.

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<sup>50</sup> Shah, *Human Rights in Various Regions: Haiti*.

<sup>51</sup> Clark, “Domestic Violence,” 310.

<sup>52</sup> Wiley, “A Grassroots Religious Response.”